

Fast-growing web of doorbell cams raises privacy fears

July 19 2019, by Amy Forliti And Matt O'brien



In this Tuesday, July 16, 2019, photo, Ernie Field holds up a live video of himself taken by a Ring doorbell camera at the front door at his home in Wolcott, Conn. Field won a free Ring camera and said he had to register for the app to qualify for the raffle. Now he gets alerts on his phone when a car drives by and a 30-second video when his daughter gets home from school. (AP Photo/Jessica Hill)

The woodsy community of Wolcott, Connecticut, doesn't see a lot of crime. But when the police chief heard about an opportunity to distribute doorbell cameras to some homes, he didn't hesitate.

The police who keep watch over the town of 16,000 raffled off free cameras in a partnership with the camera manufacturer. So far, the devices have encountered more bears than criminals, but Chief Ed Stephens is still a fan. "Anything that helps keep the town safe, I'm going to do it," he said.

But as more police agencies join with the company known as Ring, the partnerships are raising privacy concerns. Critics complain that the systems turn neighborhoods into places of constant surveillance and create suspicion that falls heavier on minorities. Police say the cameras can serve as a digital neighborhood watch.

Critics also say Ring, a subsidiary of Amazon, appears to be marketing its cameras by stirring up fear of crime at a time when it's decreasing. Amazon's promotional videos show people lurking around homes, and the company recently posted a job opening for a managing news editor to "deliver breaking crime news alerts to our neighbors."

"Amazon is profiting off of fear," said Chris Gilliard, an English professor at Michigan's Macomb Community College and a prominent critic of Ring and other technology that he says can reinforce race barriers. Part of the strategy seems to be selling the cameras "where the fear of crime is more real than the actual existence of crime."

The cameras offer a wide view from wherever they are positioned. Homeowners get phone alerts with streaming video if the doorbell rings or the device's heat sensors detect a person or a passing car. Ring's basic doorbell sells for \$99, with recurring charges starting at \$3 a month for users who want footage stored. Ring says it stores the recordings for two

months unless they are deleted by users.



In this Tuesday, July 16, 2019, photo, Ernie Field pushes the doorbell on his Ring doorbell camera at his home in Wolcott, Conn. Police departments around the country are partnering with the doorbell camera company Ring in an effort to fight crime and create a sort of modern-day neighborhood watch. (AP Photo/Jessica Hill)

Many law enforcement agencies nationwide said the idea to partner with Ring came after the company promoted its product at law enforcement conferences.

Some departments have chosen to simply use Ring's Neighbors app, which encourages residents to share videos of suspicious activity. Other agencies agreed to provide subsidies, matched by Ring, to offer hundreds of discounted cameras in hopes of tapping into footage of residential streets, yards and sidewalks. And some police chiefs raffle off the devices.

Ring would not disclose the number of communities with such partnerships. Sharing video is always voluntary and privacy is protected, according to the company and police.

"There is nothing required of homeowners who participate in the subsidies, and their identity and data remain private," spokeswoman Brigid Gorham said. She said customers can control who views their footage, and no personally identifiable information is shared with police without a user's consent.

Realistically, though, if police want video for an investigation, they can seek a search warrant.

Tech industry analyst Carolina Milanesi said engaging with police and offering incentives is a "very smart move by Ring" and a missed opportunity for competitors, including Google's Nest and smaller companies such as Arlo Technologies and SimpliSafe.



In this Tuesday, July 16, 2019, photo, Ernie Field poses for a photograph next to a Ring doorbell camera at his home in Wolcott, Conn. Field won a free Ring camera and said he had to register for the app to qualify for the raffle. Now he gets alerts on his phone when a car drives by and a 30-second video when his daughter gets home from school. (AP Photo/Jessica Hill)

But a staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California called the system "an unmitigated disaster" for the privacy of many neighborhoods.

Through the subsidy programs, Amazon "gets to offer, at taxpayer dime, discounted products that allow it to really expand its tentacles into wide areas of private life way more than it already has," Mohammad Tajsar

said.

The Los Angeles suburb of Arcadia has spent \$50,000 to offer discounts on 1,000 cameras. Several other communities in the region also participate in subsidy programs, and officials in Los Angeles County just voted last month to get on board.

Officers can view a "heat map" that shows the general area where cameras are, but they do not see a camera's actual location. If police want a video, they must contact Ring to see if the resident is willing to share, said Jennifer Brutus, senior management analyst for the Arcadia Police Department.

Arcadia launched its program at the end of 2017, and in the following year, the city saw a 25% decrease in residential burglaries, Brutus said. It's hard to quantify how much of that is directly related to Ring, but she said the devices act as a deterrent.

In one case, a doorbell camera caught footage of four burglary suspects trying to enter a residence. Three were arrested at the time, but a fourth got away. After the homeowner gave Arcadia detectives some Ring video clips, police identified and arrested the last suspect.



In this Friday, June 28, 2019, photo, Vicki and Larry Eklund pose with their 7-foot-tall bald eagle carving at their home in Coon Rapids, Minn. When the Eklund's 150-pound bald eagle carving was stolen from their yard earlier this year, police in the Minneapolis suburb of Coon Rapids had a key piece of evidence: an image of the suspect looking directly into Eklund's doorbell camera. Police posted the Ring doorbell video on social media, and hours later the Army veteran's valued carving was returned. (AP Photo/Jeff Baenen)

Hammond, Indiana, also put up money to offer Ring cameras at a discount. Lt. Steve Kellogg said the partnership was a natural move for a city that already uses cameras to read license plates.

"You cannot enter or leave our city without ... being captured on film," he said, adding that doorbell cameras are the next logical step. "We thought, 'Well, the only angle we don't really have is cameras right by the homes.'"

He said sharing video is voluntary.

Green Bay, Wisconsin, gets one free camera for every 20 people who sign up for the Ring app through a city link. Initially, police required recipients of those free cameras to agree to provide any video police requested. It dropped the requirement after The Associated Press began reporting this story.

In the Minneapolis suburb of Coon Rapids, a thief stole a 7-foot, 150-pound bald eagle carving from Larry Eklund's yard earlier this year. Police had a key piece of evidence: an image of the suspect looking directly into Eklund's doorbell camera.

A few days went by with no leads. Then officers posted the video on social media. Hours later, the carving was returned.



In this Saturday, March 23, 2019, image made from video, a man tries to leave with an bald eagle carving at the Coon Rapids, Minn., home of Larry and Vicki Eklund. A thief stole the 7-foot, 150-pound carving from the Eklunds' yard. Police had a key piece of evidence, though: An image of the suspect looking directly into the Eklunds' doorbell camera (Courtesy of Larry and Vicki Eklund via AP)

"If we wouldn't have had the Ring, we would have never been able to recognize the guy," Eklund said. "I'm sure it would've been just really hard to get it back."

But Coon Rapids opted not to partner with Ring and instead started its own in-house volunteer camera registry. Trish Heitman, a community outreach specialist for the police department, said the city did not want to promote a particular camera brand.

Another big issue was confidentiality. Coon Rapids keeps its list of registered camera owners private. If a crime occurs near a camera, police can contact homeowners in the registry to see if they want to share video.

If any partnership required data sharing, "we would never do it," Heitman said.

Back in Wolcott, Ernie Field won a free Ring camera and said he had to register for the app to qualify for the raffle. Now he gets alerts on his phone when a car drives by and a short video when his daughter gets home from school.

"I don't know if there's more crime now, or we just know about it more because of social media," he said.



In this Wednesday, July 3, 2019, frame made from video, a person uses the Ring smartphone app in Detroit. America's fast-growing web of doorbell cameras is being fueled in part by the support of cities and police departments. They see the cameras as a tech ally in the never-ending fight against crime. But some privacy advocates worry that the program is being driven by overblown fears of crime and contributes to a surveillance society. (AP Photo/Mike Householder)

Field, who said he had been looking at other cameras, wondered whether Wolcott's partnership gave Amazon an unfair advantage.

"They have a monopoly over a lot of things," he said. "And they're kind of taking over everything."

© 2019 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Fast-growing web of doorbell cams raises privacy fears (2019, July 19) retrieved 14 December 2025 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2019-07-fast-growing-web-doorbell-cams-privacy.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--